

## COLONIAL MORAVIANS, THEIR STATUS AMONG THE CHURCHES

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THE Moravian Church today is a respectable member of the family of churches. If some people still class it as a queer sect, it is only because Moravians are too few in number to be well known. Be that as it may, Moravianism is now safely in the midstream of American Christianity. This respectability has been enhanced by America's growing interest in its cultural roots, for a tradition reaching back into the colonial era commands respect in a country in search of its own soul.

When we study the colonial scene closely we find that the Moravians had quite a different status then. The story of Moravian beginnings in America is that of a religious minority in a generally unfriendly environment. Moravians came to America relatively late, their first settlement not being made until three years after the chartering, in 1732, of Georgia, the last of the thirteen colonies. Of the colonial churches which still exist, only the Methodist is younger. Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Reformed (both Dutch and German), Roman Catholics, Friends, Mennonites, Brethren, and Schwenkfelders were already here when the Moravians arrived. Furthermore, most of these churches were already well established in Europe, while the Moravians came to the new world as a denomination still in the early stages of development. Though in part they were a renewal of the pre-Reformation Bohemian Brethren,<sup>1</sup> they were much

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<sup>1</sup> The Moravian Church's claim to being a continuation of the Bohemian Brethren has a threefold basis: (1) the majority of the refugees who settled at Herrnhut, beginning in 1722, were evangelicals from Moravia and Bohemia, who had maintained secretly the tradition of the Brethren's Church while outwardly conforming to Roman Catholic worship; (2) the form of church discipline of the Bohemian Brethren was influential in the development of patterns of community life in the Renewed Moravian Church; and (3) the episcopal succession of the Bohemian Brethren, maintained by that part of the church which continued within the framework of the Reformed Church in Poland, was passed on to the renewed church.

more German pietists shaped by the personality of Count Zinzendorf. The first congregation of the renewed church, Herrnhut in Saxony, had been founded only thirteen years before settlement in America.

Not only did they come into a situation where established denominations were on the field, but they also came as disciples of the most controversial religious figure of the time. Count Zinzendorf's unpopularity with many might not have been so pronounced had he been an outright dissenter. He refused to accept the label of dissenter, however, insisting that being a Moravian did not mean separation from the established churches. It took the renewed Moravian Church some twenty years after the founding of Herrnhut to see itself as a separate denomination. Much of the unpopularity of the Moravians in America during the first decade was because neither they themselves, nor those around them knew exactly who they were. Zinzendorf himself was still working that out in his own mind, making decisions on a somewhat experimental basis.

This is not to say that the Moravians were confused about their mission in life. They were a disciplined body of experiential Christians with a sense of urgency in evangelizing at home and abroad. Had they been Roman Catholics, they would undoubtedly have been organized as a monastic order. But eighteenth-century Protestantism had trouble accepting something that was neither exactly a denomination, nor exactly a pietist interchurch society.

The beginning of the Moravian Church in America has often been told and need not be repeated here except so far as is necessary to understand the status of Moravians in the colonies. The first venture was the ill-fated community at Savannah, Georgia, between 1735 and 1740. Almost parallel with it was migration to Pennsylvania, for Spangenberg was commissioned to go there immediately after getting the Georgia settlement started. Already in 1734 Zinzendorf had sent one of his Herrnhuters, George Boehnisch, to Pennsylvania with the Schwenkfelders. Spangenberg spent three years, 1736-1739, in the Quaker Province, where his headquarters was the farm of Christopher Wiegner, formerly associated with these same Schwenkfelders. In 1740 and 1741 Bethlehem and Nazareth through a combination of almost chance circumstances became the first two permanent settlements.

Basic to an understanding of Zinzendorf's plan for work among the immigrants, particularly his fellow Germans, is an awareness of his loyalty to the Lutheran Church, and his passionate desire to bring experiential Christians of all traditions together in fellowship. Before we elaborate upon this, the disorganized state of religion, especially among the Lutherans and Reformed in Pennsylvania should be noted. The religious life of the Germans had long been in a depressed state in Europe, as an aftermath of the Thirty Years War and the theological controversies of the post-Reformation era. This worsened among those coming to America.<sup>2</sup> Conditions in Pennsylvania were somewhat better among the English-speaking peoples in the Anglican, Presbyterian, and Quaker Churches.

At the same time the leaven of revival in the form of pietism had begun to work. Pietism had come to the new world with some of the immigrants and was a background factor in the Great Awakening in America, which reached its climax in the preaching of George Whitefield in New England in 1741. There were signs of this awakening among the Pennsylvania Germans in the 1730's. About the time that Spangenberg arrived a handful of men of different religious persuasions began meeting at Skippack, in present day Montgomery County, to seek means of setting it in motion. They formed themselves into the Associated Brethren of Skippack, which they continued for about three years.

This association was the direct forerunner of the Moravian Church in Pennsylvania and therefore in the other colonies as well. Spangenberg's evangelistic labors followed avenues which membership in the group opened up to him. This was the kind of soil in which a project like the Pennsylvania Synods of 1742 would take root. Zinzendorf did not believe that Pennsylvania needed another denomination to add to the already sectarian state of affairs. But the fact that neither the Lutherans nor the Reformed were yet organized, and that the other German bodies were small in total membership and might be won back from their sectarianism to their historic churches, suggested something new, a union of Christians. He conceived of the Moravian Church as the means through which this might be accomplished.

<sup>2</sup> One Lutheran historian says that as late as 1730 there were only eight regular Lutheran ministers in the colonies. Edmund Jacob Wolf, *The Lutherans in America*, J. A. Hill, New York, 1889, 215.

Zinzendorf's initial efforts toward this end were made through the Seven Pennsylvania Synods of 1742, during the first half of his fourteen months' stay in America.<sup>3</sup> The results would have discouraged a lesser man. That they did not discourage him is clear from the valedictory speech he made on the eve of his return to Europe. This speech delivered at the home of Stephen Benezet in Philadelphia on January 9, 1743, and known as his *Pennsylvania Testament*,<sup>4</sup> sets forth his ideals and plans for the Brethren in America along the very same lines he had expressed at the synods.

The *Pennsylvania Testament* portrays the Moravian Church as a union church by virtue of its position in the days of the old Unity. Zinzendorf cites the Brethren's adherence to the Consensus of Sendomir of 1570 and the Bohemian Confession of 1575, both of them involving union among the Brethren, Lutherans, and Reformed. In his opinion this union character of the Moravian Church, together with its possession of the ministerial orders of the old Unity, placed it in a position to supply both Lutheran and Reformed churches with ministers allowing each of the churches so served to remain what it was. He felt that his Brethren, composed of gathered, experiential Christians, could give these transplanted German state churches much-needed vitality without disturbing traditional organization or creed. He expressed his reluctance to have the Moravian Church develop as a denomination. He had not wanted it to happen in Europe. Though it was now an accomplished fact, he expected it to be only temporary, a structure which would pass away after its mission had been accomplished.

He saw even less reason for the introduction of Moravian orders and church discipline into the American scene than in Europe. He argued that since there were in America already enough free churches there was no need for another, and if the Moravians became a denomination here, they would soon be just like the others. In Europe, on the other hand, according to him, there was more justification for a separate Moravian Church because of the

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of one in the Reformed Church at Germantown, these synods met in private homes. Four were in Germantown and one each at Falkner Swamp, Oley, and Philadelphia. They have been thoroughly discussed by many authors, both Moravian and non-Moravian. Manuscript minutes are to be found in the Moravian Archives at Bethlehem.

<sup>4</sup> The *Pennsylvania Testament* is printed in full in *Budingische Sammlungen einiger in die Kirchen-Historie*, Vol. III, Leipzig, 1744, 188-255.

restrictions within the state churches. The following are his own words on the subject:

In Europe the house where the Lord Jesus and his people live, and where matters pertaining to his affairs and leading are sovereign . . . is the Moravian Church. The reason the Moravian Church must be such a house is that in many places in Europe there remains suppression of conscience. There is prevailing sentiment against the Congregation of God in the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

But with reference to America he says:

Here the Congregation of God in the Spirit is the *factotum* and not the Moravian Church. Here we live in an invisible house. . . . I see no reason (if the Savior does not specifically so direct) to introduce the Moravian orders and church discipline into this country. One thing prevents me from entirely abandoning her organization and moves me to permit her to exist as another church. It is that in the Moravian Church the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches are united.<sup>6</sup>

Confusing, naive, impractical—call it what you will—that is the way the Moravians tried to work for about seven or eight years in Pennsylvania. Some Moravian evangelists called themselves Lutheran, some Reformed, and some simply Brethren. They still looked to the Pennsylvania Synods as the directive for their program. When Spangenberg returned from Europe in November of 1744, he came as a recently consecrated bishop with specific authority from the Moravian governing board to ordain not only ministers of the Moravian Church, but also ministers of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches who desired such ordination. He also came as the appointed head of the General Synod, by which name the continuation of the Pennsylvania Synods was known. In addition he was the chief elder for the distinctly Moravian portion of the Brethren in America.

Spangenberg brought with him from Zinzendorf a set of sixteen rules known as the "General Plan." We quote the substance of

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-205.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

only those which bear upon the position of the Moravians with respect to other churches:

2. The itinerants are to have their rendezvous ordinarily at Bethlehem, but are to move about "as a cloud before the wind of the Lord to fructify all places."
8. The Brethren in America should not call themselves Protestant or Lutheran or Moravian, but simply Evangelical Brethren and the Brethren's Church.
9. It shall not be the purpose to make things Moravian in carrying on the general evangelistic work; but if a church settlement [Ortsgemeine] comes into existence at Nazareth, it could be formed as a Moravian congregation *ceteris paribus*.
10. The work among the Indians is to be prosecuted on apostolic principles without regard to denominationalism.
12. The synod shall remain a general one, open to all servants of Christ who desire benefit from it for their denominations, or the salvation of their fellowmen. It shall be regarded as a Church of God in the Spirit with a general direction extending among people of all denominations.<sup>7</sup>

From the Bethlehem-Nazareth community the itinerant workers went out in all directions, mostly within the borders of Pennsylvania, but by no means confined to it. Illustrative of the manner in which the itinerants went about their work is the notable tour of the Brethren Schnell and Hussey from Bethlehem to Savannah, Georgia, and back between November 6, 1743, and April 10, 1744. Going they walked and returning they sailed as far as New York, rather circuitously by way of New England ports. In the account of their trip Schnell relates that a man in York asked him, "Are you not one of Zinzendorf's people?" He replied, "I know your meaning well, but I am a Lutheran preacher and no Zinzendorfer." In Virginia this is reported, "After preaching was over I distributed among them some Calvinistic catechisms, as they were all Calvinists." He reports that in another place in Virginia, after he had preached, the German Calvinist congregation wished to keep him.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Cited by J. M. Levering in *A History of Bethlehem*, 178-179.

<sup>8</sup> Schnell's own account of this journey in German manuscript is in the Moravian archives. There is also an English translation apparently contemporary with the original, but without the translator's name.

Spangenberg, under orders from Zinzendorf in Germany, continued the union idea for the first four years of the period of the economy in Bethlehem. It was a losing battle. As Hamilton observes:

They could not forever hold out against the logic of events. They might gather representatives of all sorts of faiths for common deliberation in behalf of unchurched colonists and heathen Indians, twelve denominations being recognized for example, amongst the members of the "Pennsylvania Synod" convened in Lancaster in the court house in 1745. They might record resolutions that Bethlehem was to be regarded not as a denominational settlement, but as the home of a missionary society; and that the congregations which were organized and supplied with ministers and school-masters as a result of the "Pennsylvania Synods" were to be considered attached to no denomination. As a point of fact, however, in spite of their purposes they could not prevent the synods from assuming a distinctly Moravian cast. These so-called undenominational congregations inevitably became Moravian, even though contrary to the intentions of the leaders of the Moravian Church.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, with Bishop John de Watteville from Europe in charge, two synods in October of 1748 and January of 1749 brought about the transition of the Moravians in America from their status as an interchurch "Congregation of God in the Spirit" to a distinct denomination. At the latter synod thirty-one congregations with a total membership of about 1,000 in seven different colonies were recognized as comprising the Moravian Church.

"As the twig is bent so the tree grows" is an old proverb applicable to the Moravian Church in America. The union character of the Brethren during their first decade lingered long after they had become a denomination. For years their congregational registers listed members with reference to the churches of their origin, as Lutheran, Reformed, Bohemian Brethren, Anglican, and others. Town and country congregations, that is Moravian churches outside of the closed settlements, even beyond the colonial period, had two classes of members, communicants and society members. This was a sort of inner and outer circle. Only reluctantly

<sup>9</sup> J. Taylor Hamilton, *A History of the Moravian Church*, Bethlehem, Pa., 1900, 168.

did Moravian ministers receive society members into full church membership. Thus we find Peter Boehler in 1754 addressing the society attached to the New York congregation:

We wish that all Society members would continue in their respective churches as a bait, and have their children baptized by their own pastor, and partake of the Holy Communion in their particular Church. It is not our way to draw people from the Churches in which they have been brought up, and we earnestly wish that the ministers of other denominations would be friendly to us, for in this way they would not lose so many members. The baptism of children, excepting those of members of our Church is not approved by the Synod.<sup>10</sup>

How this policy affected the growth of the church is easy to surmise. Of the approximately 150 present-day Moravian churches in the United States, located in fifteen states, only eighteen date back to the colonial period. Six of these colonial churches are in North Carolina, having been organized between 1753 and 1780. Eleven of the remaining twelve were already recognized as congregations or preaching places at the above-mentioned synod of 1749. Only Schoeneck emerged as a new congregation in the North, and it is so close to Nazareth that it can hardly be said to have been a new venture.

What is the explanation? Decline of zeal? Perhaps. But spiritual decline did not seriously affect the Moravians until after the Revolution. The explanation more likely lies in what the Moravians had been trying to do, namely to create an interchurch organization, which in Protestantism's poly-denominational structure is extremely difficult to achieve. Moravians were pietists and often encountered opposition because they were, but opposition in itself was not a handicap to their growth. Pietism was a widespread movement among Germans. Though Moravian pietism had its own peculiar stamp, it preached essentially the same Gospel as pietism in general. The Moravian offense to churchmen of colonial America was in trying to create an organization out of religious experience, and this effort threatened to undercut traditional church structures and confessional distinctions.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Harry E. Stocker in *A Home Mission History of the Moravian Church in the United States and Canada*, Bethlehem, Pa., 1924, 35-36.

Henry Melchior Muhlenberg himself was an ardent pietist, a product of the University of Halle, just as Zinzendorf was a product of the Halle preparatory school. Both were loyal Lutherans, though the latter might be called a hyphenated Lutheran. It is not hard to understand why Muhlenberg, upon his arrival in America in 1742, should object to Zinzendorf's claiming to be the superintendent of Lutherans in Pennsylvania, while at the same time serving a Reformed church and sending out some of his followers as Reformed preachers. With this sort of man in action Lutheranism was in grave danger. It was, therefore, almost inevitable that Muhlenberg rather than Zinzendorf should have become the father of organized Lutheranism in Pennsylvania. The same observation applies to the Reformed Church. A minority did respond appreciatively to the services of Moravian-Reformed preachers, but again the majority preferred those who were outrightly Reformed and not something hyphenated. Michael Schlatter from Switzerland, under the Reformed synods of Holland, was the one who in 1747 united the Germans into a synod. It is also to be noted that most of the Reformed pastors were in close touch with the Classis of Amsterdam, which was fanatically anti-Zinzendorf.

Another difficulty toward the realization of Zinzendorf's ideal was the natural barrier between the German- and English-speaking peoples in the colonies. The Count theoretically included all religious bodies in his proposed congregation of God in the Spirit, and at most of the synods between 1742 and 1748 there was token representation of Anglicans, Quakers, and Presbyterians. But there was never serious rapport between them and the German bodies. Moravians did have among their number a sprinkling of English members, as names like Shaw, Powell, Bruce, Okely, Rice, Yarnell, Uttley, Thorpe, Gambold, and Hussey reveal. Some of these itinerated among English-speaking colonists, but nothing much came of it and Moravianism in America remained overwhelmingly German. Furthermore, in the case of the Scotch-Irish there was added to the nationality barrier a theological one. The rigidly Calvinistic Scotch-Irish<sup>11</sup> were among the most virulent enemies

<sup>11</sup> The Calvinism of the German Reformed was much less aggressive than that of the Scotch-Irish. Lutherans and Reformed got on well together as evidenced by the union church arrangement still in practice in eastern Pennsylvania.

of the Moravians, and since they were the most geographically widespread of all the religious groups in the colonies, Moravians had difficulties with them everywhere. The influence of George Whitefield deepened this cleavage. Also, Moravian missions among the Indians stood in the way of Scotch-Irish settlement of the westward-moving frontier.

Recognition by the British Parliament of the Moravians as an "Ancient Protestant Episcopal Church" in 1749 gave them legal standing and protected them from indignities such as their missionaries had suffered prior to that time in both New York and Virginia. Yet the provisions of this act, granting them indemnity from bearing arms and taking oaths, hardly served to increase Moravian popularity as tension mounted at the time of the French and Indian War and again at the outbreak of the Revolution.

The result of these factors was that the center of gravity of Moravian life, except for its continued activity in foreign and Indian missions, shifted to the exclusive settlements: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Lititz, and for a brief period Hope, New Jersey, in the North; and Salem and Bethabara in the South. Perhaps it would have gone in that direction anyway, for that was the course of development in Europe also. Basically the core of Zinzendorf's Christian world view was the "Congregation of God in the Spirit," that is, the meeting together in fellowship of those who have experienced "heart religion." One phase of it is the diaspora, in which Christians of this stamp live in the world with their more nominal fellow believers. The other phase of it is the gathered community where such Christians actually live together. In Germany the genius of the Moravian Church has been the dynamic relationship between diaspora<sup>12</sup> and exclusive settlement. The diaspora phase was probably unworkable under the American denominational system. The other phase, the closed settlement, flourished in America during the colonial era and for about a generation beyond that.

While it lasted there was practiced a way of life which Americans think of when they hear the name Moravian. It was a

<sup>12</sup> The membership of the Moravian Church in Germany never exceeded ten thousand, yet its influence has been much greater than in America because of its diaspora societies in the state churches. Diaspora members were five or six times as numerous as actual Moravian Church members. This phase of Moravian activity has been declining since World War I.

dedicated, practical piety expressing itself in a Christocentric devotional life organized around a unique social grouping, known as the choir system; a continuing missionary outreach to the heathen world after the home mission outreach had ceased; skilled craftsmanship; thriving business enterprises; the careful training of the young, accounting for the important place of schools; a remarkable development of aesthetic life, at least in music and in religious poetry. It was this way of life which eventually earned for the Moravians status in the world, though it gave offense to many, especially in times of crisis.

Ironically, it was not religious men who first began to appreciate the Moravians, but wise, practical men of the world like Benjamin Franklin and younger contemporaries of his, members of the Continental Congress and military leaders of the Revolution. The Revolution brought them into contact with Moravians, bringing the latter out of their isolation again. What these men saw in Moravian settlements impressed them. They began to send their sons and daughters to these centers of piety to be educated. Moravian schools after the Revolution began to educate non-Moravians in large numbers, whereas before a non-Moravian in a Moravian school had been the exception. But this coming out of isolation was the beginning of another process, the development of the Moravian Church into a middle of the road Protestant church. What the Count said in his *Pennsylvania Testament* has come to pass: "If the Moravian Church becomes a denomination in America, it will be just like the others."

The overall title of this symposium is "German Pietist Thought in Colonial America." I have taken liberties with my assignment and have dealt rather with the organizational aspects of the Moravians. My main reason for this is that if I had stuck strictly to the word "thought" I would have had less to say, for Moravianism's contribution has been only indirectly in this area. Moravianism during the colonial period was a way of life in which not a great deal of attention was paid to a theoretical framework. It was a Christocentric, experiential religion, issuing rather spontaneously in a program of practical piety.

Zinzendorf's chief concern was with what he felt should be common to Christians of all confessions, experiential knowledge of the Savior, particularly the suffering Savior. The central point

of his theology is well expressed in the title of one of his well-known hymns, "The Savior's Blood and Righteousness." To him this was the magnet to which all true Christians are attracted. Moravians through their influence upon the Wesleys brought this emphasis into the eighteenth-century revival in England, whence also it came to America to coalesce with what was going on here. So while the Moravians in the colonies were more or less confined to German-speaking people in their evangelism, it is not to be forgotten that they were instrumental in initiating the revival among the English.

So far as the Germans were concerned, the role of the Moravians may be said to have been that of a catalyst. Rebuffed by the Lutherans and the Reformed, the Moravians nevertheless galvanized these two groups into action. The same decade which saw the failure of the Pennsylvania Synods saw the organization of both Lutherans and Reformed. This is more than just coincidence. The Lutherans in America had been appealing to churches in the homeland for pastors, but had got no results until Zinzendorf was on the scene. On this point the Count himself made this caustic comment: "All the priests and levites in Europe were deaf to the cry of the Pennsylvania sufferer until their grudge against the Samaritan [himself] unstopped their ears."<sup>13</sup>

Since we often overlook the obvious, I should like to note a contribution that falls under this category. Anyone who came to the colonies and helped build new communities was making a valuable contribution to an emerging nation which needed people. Moravians with their practical piety built fine communities which still exist. Bethlehem and Winston-Salem, for instance, together number some 170,000 Americans who count it a privilege to live in one of these cities. Thousands more outside of these communities look to them for services, opportunities, and values which greatly enrich their lives. Few will dispute the fact that an important ingredient in what makes them desirable communities is their colonial Moravian roots.

But perhaps the most significant contribution of colonial Moravians lies in their effect upon us today. Moravian life in the eighteenth century can be likened to a deposit in a bank. Today we are drawing upon that deposit and discovering to our satisfac-

<sup>13</sup> Levering, *op. cit.*, 104.

tion that there is some accrued interest. We are drawing upon values of our forefathers which many of their contemporaries rejected. Zinzendorf's ecumenical ideals were not realized. Yet his failure is helping to nourish some of our successes along these lines. Moravian missions to the Indians were a glorious dream and achievement with a tragic end. But their very tragedy is helping to forge new attitudes more in accord with Christian ideals. The massacre of ninety Christian Indians at Gnadenhuetten is almost like a crucifixion which has probably shamed many a white man into repentance for what his kind have done to those of other races. Colonial Moravian settlements still intact, adjacent to twentieth-century industrial activity, witness eloquently to spiritual values which this secular age so desperately needs. Colonial Moravian music, little appreciated outside of the closed settlements at the time of its creation, lost in archives for a century, is today enriching worship in many churches of different denominations throughout the land.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Invaluable to a study of the beginning of the Moravian Church in America is Levin T. Reichel's *The Early History of the Church of the United Brethren in North America, 1734-1748*, Nazareth, Pa., 1888.